SYNOPSIS

The Novels of J.M Coetzee: A Critique of Civilization

A synopsis submitted to

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By

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Title of the Thesis:

The Novels of J.M. Coetzee: A Critique of Civilization

Introduction: John Maxwell Coetzee is a Nobel Prize winning postmodernist author. He was born in Cape Town, South Africa on Ninth February 1940 to Afrikaans parents. His family belonged to early Dutch settlers of 17th century in South Africa. His father was a lawyer, a government employee while his mother was a teacher.

Coetzee's works exhibit a unique combination of intellectual power, stylistic grace and historical insight as well as ethical stance. Coetzee's novels provide an insight into the historical, political, socio-economic, and cultural forces as they interact with each other in the context of South Africa. His fictions follow different narrative patterns but some basic issues such as writing, authority, language, domination, marginalisation etc. are commonly discussed. His writings cover a diverse field of life and deal with contemporary issues.

Coetzee has been honoured with many awards and distinctions throughout his career. He was awarded the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for his much acclaimed novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians. He* has the distinction of winning the CNA Prize three times. His novel *Age of Iron* was awarded The Sunday Express book of the year Award. In 1995, his novel *The Master of Petersburg* was awarded the Irish Times International Fiction Prize. He has also been honoured by the Common Wealth Writers' Prize and the 1987 Jerusalem Prize for the freedom of the individual in society.

He is the first author to be awarded the Man Booker Prize twice firstly for his novel *Life and Times of Michael K* in 1983, thereafter for *Disgrace* in 1999. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in the year 2003.

Coetzee has been highly lauded for his craftsmanship at composition, superb dialogues rich with meaning and his brilliant power of analysis. He is also well-known for the moral nature of his works. He is a distinguished critic of cruelty to animals and is dedicated to the cause of animal rights. His novels like *Disgrace*, *The Lives of Animals and Elizabeth Costello* raise issues of cruelty towards animals.

The present thesis is based on his twelve novels which are as follows*:*

Dusklands 1974, Waiting for the Barbarians 1980, In the Heart of the Country 1977, Life and Times of Michael K 1983, Foe 1986, Age of Iron 1990, Master of Petersburg 1994, The Lives of Animals 1999, Disgrace 1999, Elizabeth Costello 2003, Slow Man 2005, Diary of a Bad Year 2007. Besides the above twelve novels Coetzee has written three fictional autobiographies, in numerous works of non-fiction as well as translations.

The novels of Coetzee provide a mirror through which we can view the true picture of human civilisation. He finds the human society in a state of turmoil and presents a critique of civilization through the various novels analysing people and situations, institutions and societies as they exist.

In the context of civilization the following quotation by Wolfi Landstreicher is noteworthy-

"The idea of civilization is frequently associated with good wine, beautiful human creations and refined tastes, but in reality the characteristics shared by all civilizations are far less pleasant: domination, genocide and environmental devastation to name a few."

The author evokes scenarios in which one is bound to reason whether human civilization is nearly a self sustaining ecosystem evolved spontaneously out of the struggle between the species or whether it genuinely affords grounds for dignity. The artist would not allow us to dwell upon aesthetics which themselves may serve as webs of spiders serving as the hinges of the food chain behind the castle of civilization. The author is keen on exploring the space for human dignity amidst the interplay between the hunter and the hunted, the predator and his prey. The author's is a journey to discover the scope of ideals, the role of justice and the space for equality in the web we call civilization.

The present study is based on Coetzee's multifarious perspective on human civilization. All the twelve novels of the author are to be analysed in detail and through a chapter-wise discussion of the instances and circumstances featuring a critique of human civilization an in-depth study is to be made.

A Brief Review of the Work already done in the field

J.M. Coetzee is a much discussed post-modernist author. His works have been analysed critically and the major themes featuring in his novels are post-colonialism, power relations in South African society, post-apartheid South Africa, colonisation, violence and narration in white South

African writing, paradoxes of power, speech and silence, narrative techniques employed by the author, the politics of writing, the voice of history in his novels, culture and imperialism, ideas of community, textuality and the land, canonicity, the politics of humiliation, apartheid censorship and culture of consequences, qualities alternative animal ethics, his critique of reason, J.M. Coetzee and ethics, Irony and belief, the authors hidden polemic with Nietzsche, the power of narration etc.

Though a great deal has already been written on the authors works, much remains to be explored and analysed in the fictions of this brilliant author. I would like to study the novels of J.M. Coetzee from the point of view of the critique of civilisation as emerging dominantly from his multifaceted novels.

Objectives

The objectives of this study are-

1) To bring out a comprehensive picture of civilisation as depicted in the entire content of J.M. Coetzee's novels.

2) To seek answers regarding the success or otherwise of social norms of justice as sought in the novels of J.M. Coetzee.

3) To attempt to probe into the wider questions of free will versus determinism as laid out in the novels of J.M. Coetzee.

4) To crystallise the concept of human civilisation, its significance, its positive as well as negative attributes, its fragility and its consequences.

5) To enquire into the truth or otherwise of the capability of mankind to hold his ground in the face of varying levels of adversity as sketched out in the novels of J.M. Coetzee.

6) To examine issues of human prejudice when it comes to the question of weighing his own interests when they conflict with social and species equality.

Noteworthy Contribution in the Proposed Field of Work

The proposed work- **The Novels of J.M. Coetzee: A Critique of Civilisation** does not feature in the body of criticism on J.M. Coetzee's fiction. The present work will lead towards an analyses of J.M. Coetzee is attempting to depict the characters, situations, institutions and social political system presenting the human civilisation in a state of discord as a consequence of mutually opposing forces within the system of civilization.

Some of the noteworthy works by various research scholars and authors on J.M. Coetzee's works and on related issues are as follows:

(I) Shohat, Ella, "The Struggle Over Representation, Casting, Coalition and The Politics of Identification." Late Imperial Culture, Ed. R. De La Campa, E.A. Kaplan and M. Sprinkler. London and New York, Verso, 1995 (166-178)

(II) Jolly, Rosemary. *Colonisation, Violence And Narration In South African Writing*. Andre Brink, Breyten Breytenbach and J.M. Coetzee, Athens, Ohio UP, 1995.

(III) Heyns, Michiel. "The Whole Country's Truth: Confession And Narrative In Recent White South African Writing". Modern Fiction Studies 46:1 (Spring 2000). 42-66

(IV) Parry, Benita. "Speech and Silence in the Novels of J.M. Coetzee". Huggan and Watson 37-66

(V) Sartre, Jean Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. Trans. Hazel E.Barness. New York. Washington Square Press, 1966.

(VI) Said, Edward. *Reflections on Exile and other Essays*. Cambridge. Mass. Harvard University Press, 2000.

Proposed Methodology During the Tenure of the Research Work:

Analytical method will be followed and the latest edition of *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* shall be consulted.

Chapter 1: Introduction

a) Life and Career of J.M. Coetzee:

John Maxwell Coetzee was born in Cape Town, South Africa on ninth February 1940. His family descended from early Dutch settlers of 17th century in South Africa. Coetzee studied in a Catholic school, St. Joseph College, which was situated in Cape Town suburb of Rondebosch. He studied mathematics and English at the University of Cape Town. He received BA degree with honours in English in 1960 and Bachelor of Arts with honours in mathematics in 1961.

In 1960, he worked for a time at IBM as a computer programmer. He joined the University of Texas at Austin through the Fulbright program in 1965. He was appointed Professor of English literature at the State University of New York at Buffalo and stayed there till 1971. He started teaching English literature in the University of Cape Town and was the distinguished Professor of literature during 1999 and 2001. After his retirement, he settled in Adelaide and in the University

of this place, became an honorary research fellow.

Coetzee has written twelve novels and three fictional memoirs, and numerous works of non-fiction as well as translations.

Coetzee has been honoured with many awards and distinctions throughout his career. He received the James Tait Black Memorial prize, the CNA prize on three occasions, the Sunday express book of the year award, the Commonwealth writers' prize and the 1987 Jerusalem prize.

He is the first author to be awarded the Man Booker prize twice. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in the year 2003. He became the forth African writer who was honoured with the Nobel Prize and he is the second South African Nobel laureate after Nadine Gordimer. His writings have been acclaimed far and wide and he emerges as one of the leading intellectual authors on topics of contemporary world.

Coetzee's life and his writings present him as a sensitive intellectual who has a wide range of issues to discuss with his readers.

b) Human Civilization: The Grey Aspects

The term civilisation has been defined and understood in numerous ways and there is no widely accepted standard definition. Sometimes it is used as a synonym of the term culture. Civilisation can also refer to society as a whole.

The following definitions explain the nature and meaning of civilization:

"Culture or civilisation is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs and habits acquired by man as a member of society."

-Edward Tyler

"What is a civilization? Is it a human community-a society-located in a particular place and time with government and social order, or is it a more abstract cultural configuration that describes the state of society at particular times in history? A Civilisation is a type of human community or society that has achieved a certain level of culture. It is contrasted with primitive communities lacking this culture."

-William McGaughey

J.M. Coetzee through his novels questions the very edifices on which civilisation seems to rest. The social structure influencing human as well as nonhuman entities is examined from various perspectives. The loopholes in the human civilisation are brought forth and a comprehensive critique of civilisation emerges dominantly through an in-depth study of his novels.

The author raises this question through his novels- Is civilisation a mere adaptation for the survival of human species or is it something yet nobler as one would like to believe?

The novels of J.M. Coetzee churn up the instruments that lay bare the arteries which sustain the pyramid of human civilization.

Chapter 2: Power and its Abuse

Themes of origin of power are constantly under consideration in the novels of J.M. Coetzee. Formed through the coagulation of resources in society, power inevitably creates deficiencies around itself. Here power appears as the peaks surrounding which we could only have a downslide.

The limits of power are so starkly laid out that on occasions it appears beyond the power of the powerful to cease to abuse. Even the redoubtable barbarians are dwarfed in their tyranny as and when they fall under the wheel of civilised wagon.

The themes of power and dominance occupy the core of Coetzee's novels. He presents the cunning ways and means of the people in power whereby they attain the capability of influencing the choices of others. Instances and circumstances where power is exercised over the marginalised and the voiceless abound in his novels.

Through his novels J.M. Coetzee enquires if power and its abuse are somehow in the natural order of things making theories of human as well as animal-rights artificial, super-imposed and all in all unnatural.

This chapter shall study various instances of abuse of power and the resulting turbulence in the lives of the affected characters or entities and also shall be examining the nature of civilisation facilitating the abuse of power.

Chapter 3: The Nature of Apathy

This chapter aims at describing how and why apathy results in the first place. Years of colonial history and subjugation produces defeatist state of mind which goes a long way in fostering the feeling of indifference among the subjects. Violation of human rights producing low self-esteem is an important determinant of apathy.

One of the major themes of Coetzee's novels is complacency in the face of human failures. The present chapter analyses the nature of apathy and its types. A psychological study of the nature of apathy is to be done with reference to new theories in human behaviour.

A case in point is Elizabeth Costello, the protagonist of the novel from the same name. She is perplexed and disturbed by the fact that perpetration and propagation of cruelty to life fails to cause any moral indignation in an ordinary human being. She laments,

"Each day is a fresh holocaust, yet as far as I can see, our moral being is untouched."

This chapter shall acquaint the reader with apathy in all its various forms as prevalent in the novels of Coetzee and shall examine how indifference is the root cause of origin and perpetration of many a evils. Complacency of attitude at times amounts to complicity in the act of inflicting pain and suffering.

Chapter 4: Perspectives on Justice

Justice is a concept of moral rightness, based on ethics, rationality, law, natural law, religion or equity. It is also the act of being just and fair.

Our concept of justice stems from our vision of what the right or appropriate state of affairs must be. Yet more often than not, our opinion on the appropriateness or otherwise of certain acts depends upon our experience. These experiences themselves are so varied that one man's justice can very often be another man's prejudice. Thus the right question may sometimes not be what is justice but whose justice?

As an example can be cited the following words as said by the magistrate in Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*:

"You think you know what is just and what is not. I understand. We all think we know. All creatures come into the world bringing with them the memory of justice."

In the novels of J.M. Coetzee, man's attempts to justify his actions have been taken up. The reader is constantly being asked to take sides and reach a position with the characters only to be finally challenged to re-examine his stance at some other point in time.

The aspects of making judgement as to the appropriateness or otherwise of a particular act has been integrally built up within the pages of J.M. Coetzee's novels. The role of repentance and re-conciliation has also been viewed.

Chapter 5: Fringes of Sanity

J.M. Coetzee at various stages through his novels returns over and over to the question of what rationality in human being signifies. A proposition he examines here is whether one could be called sane so long as he can perceive the limits of his failing mental faculties. J.M. Coetzee repeatedly brings the question of determining the authority who would define for another entity of the limits of reasonableness. Another of the propositions of J.M. Coetzee has been that the implicit desire for survival of every living creature so long as it is held by him shall make him into a rational entity.

Thus Coetzee is a thinly veiled critic of reason. The supposed intellect of the human animal is brought under the microscope in his fiction. The purported rationale behind human civilisation is dissected without anaesthesia in his novels. The author leaves the reader into such alleys of civilisation where all construct of reason gets torn asunder. Coetzee brings out a curious conjecture that man is too rational to remain rational.

Coetzee's novels '*The Life and Times of Michael K*' and *'In The Heart of The Country'*, through the characters of Michael K and Magda respectively, provide a critique of reason and lead us to enquire the real meaning of sanity in the midst of the complexity of human civilization.

Chapter 6: Scope of Ideals

The very basis of ethics is under scrutiny in the novels of J.M. Coetzee. The fallibility of mankind surfaces repeatedly in the works of J.M. Coetzee. He holds that man is still too weak to uphold the burden of ideals that he might hold dear. The demand for consistency yet proves overtly taxing to not just the weak but to the stronger among us as well.

As depicted in the novel *Waiting For The Barbarians* (1980), the Empire wishes to use its power against the so-called barbarians. After failing in this endeavour to exercise complete control of the Barbarians it lashes its fury on the magistrate and takes revenge for its defeat by making the magistrate, a scapegoat. The magistrate, once with high ideals realises that he could not become one of the barbarians who are at the receiving end of the empire's cruelty. He has already internalised the values of imperialism as being a part of the system.

Precepts of human dignity are up for debate in the works of Coetzee. Civilisation as per Coetzee has been truly adept at disguising the complete picture of tattered ethics.

Ornately served meat stakes hardly bring up thoughts of the preceding mercilessness of butchery.

No memory of slave labour ever came to disturb the royal manners of colonisers of nations. Cruelty and indignity are so integral to the fabric of civilisation that any attempt to alter the status-quo would require even greater indignities to be committed.

Chapter 7: Perspectives on Racism, Sexism and Specism

The first stone of civilisation got laid out through the natural tendency of man to form groups. Beginning with himself, man's ego extends to his family, his tribe and then his clan. The essence of ethics stands out of how far we are willing to extend this ego. A premise of how ethically sound our judgement is derived from willingness to incorporate "the other" with our own ego. Racist, sexist and spiciest behaviour that is so frequently encountered within the regime of civilisation has got to be an outcome of the constraints of our ego.

As per the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, "**Racism** is the belief that different races of people have different characters and abilities and that one's own race is the best.

Racism has been the course of unfair treatment of people or violence against them, because they belong to a different race from your own. Racism is dominantly presented through the novels of J.M. Coetzee.

Sexism is the belief that one sex is weaker, less intelligent, or less important than the other, especially when it results in someone being treated unfairly. The novels of J.M. Coetzee abound with instances of sexism where the womenfolk are victims of a patriarchal society.

The term **Specism** was coined in 1973 by British psychologist Richard D. Ryder to denote prejudice against non-humans based on morally irrelevant physical differences.

The term is mostly used by animal rights advocates, who argue that species membership has no moral significance and that it is both irrational and morally wrong to regard sentient beings as objects or property. Philosopher Tom Regan argues that all animals have inherent rights and that we cannot assign them a lesser value because of the perceived lack of rationality.

Coetzee's novels - *The Lives of Animals*, *Elizabeth Costello*, *Life And Times of Michael K*, and *Disgrace* examine the human treatment of animals on the basis of specism.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

J.M. Coetzee has brought out the failure of human civilisation through his novels. He raises difficult questions before the readers regarding general direction of civilisation which in his eyes appears to be still in its early phase.

The intelligence of human species is itself proving a hindrance to its survival. The strife between man and man continues, the questions of justice and ideals remain unresolved. Human reason fails to provide an adequate solution to the problems faced by the human civilization.

A critique of civilisation is hereby forwarded to enhance our grasp of the true state of affairs prevailing around us. In the absence of such a grasp of the precise location of potholes in our path, there would barely exist any hope for affirmative action on our part. Through this critique of civilisation, J.M. Coetzee offers an insight into the true state of our civilization. When it comes to the reaching at a verdict upon this creation of mankind (the civilization); the only reply we have is that we yet have a long way to cover.

The final lesson to be learned from a critique of civilization is to adopt a "critical stance" in judging our creation without getting overwhelmed by profound but vague rhetoric.

Expected Outcome of the Proposed Field of Work

The major part of the method is a close and thorough reading of the primary and secondary sources. The method of study aims at a close scrutiny of his novels in order to reach at a new finding and to be able to establish a new concept as seen in his novels.

The primary sources are the novels of J.M. Coetzee. The secondary sources shall include several book length and shorter studies based on his novels. This study aims to familiarise the readers with various aspects of civilisation in turmoil as represented in the novels of J.M. Coetzee and it shall analyse the consequences of human failures aiming to examine and study how much chaos and turpitude in life results from human fallibilities and initiation of corrective actions to ameliorate them in order to bring about a just social order worthy of being referred to as civilized in the real sense of the term.

Bibliography in Standard Format

The present bibliography placed at the end of this synopsis, is divided into primary and secondary sources.

List of Published Papers of the Candidate: Nil

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10. Coetzee, J.M. *Slow Man*.London.Vintage.2005

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